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THE IMPORTANCE OF WATER TO THE MIDDLE EAST

HON. BENJAMIN A. GILMAN

OF NEW YORK

IN THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Tuesday, November 16, 1999

Mr. GILMAN. Mr. Speaker, I want to take this opportunity to reprint a brief article in the Jerusalem Report, October 25, 1999 that discusses the importance of water to the Middle East. This piece also highlights the important activities of a former colleague of ours, Hon. Wayne Owens, now president of the Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation, who has taken a leading role in advocating the increased use of desalination plants in order to increase the inadequate water supplies in that region.

Entitled, "Not a Drop to Drink", the article goes on to make a significant case for desalination. Accordingly, I recommend this article to our colleagues, and commend Wayne Owens for his ongoing efforts to improve the lives of all peoples in the region through economic development projects.

[From the Jerusalem Report, Oct. 25, 1999]

NOT A DROP TO DRINK

(By David Horovitz)

More than a year ago, a former Utah Congressman named Wayne Owens came to the

Report, to tell us about a project his non-profit, Washington-based Center for Middle East Peace and Economic Cooperation was advocating: The construction of a \$300-million desalination plant at the Haderah power station, and of a second, smaller plant in Gaza, to help alleviate the chronic water shortage.

The Haderah plant alone, Owens said, would provide a fifth of Israel's domestic water needs. It could be up and running in three years. And it would not require Israeli government funding. Rather, Owens was assembling a group of investors to fund it. All he needed was a guarantee from the government that it would purchase the desalinated water.

But no guarantee was forthcoming. A spokesman at the Infrastructure Ministry dismissed the project as "premature."

A few weeks ago, I had a call from a businessman in Ireland. His company, Eagle Water Resources, had been tentatively approached by Israeli officials last year to investigate the viability of shipping water from Turkey to Israel, aboard converted oil tankers. The project was technically and economically feasible, he had established. He had the tankers ready for conversion. What he needed was a firm contract. Many months had passed; he had invested \$250,000; but no one was giving him the go-ahead.

Israel is deep in the grip of a crippling drought. The level of the Kinneret, depending on which experts you listen to, has fallen either to a 65-year low, or to its lowest level in centuries. Red lines are being crossed. Environmentalists warn that Israel's reservoirs and underground aquifers are being grossly over-pumped, and that the damage, as the falling water sources become increasingly saline, may be irrevocable. Farmers, rocked by a 40-percent reduction in their water allocation this year, fear a similar, or even graver, cut may be imposed on them next year, and warn of irrevocable damage to agriculture. Israel this year had to reduce the quantity of water it supplied to Jordan under its peace-treaty commitment; next year, it may have to struggle even harder to meet its obligation.

If Wayne Owens or Eagle Water Resources were deemed unsuitable drought-busters, being foreign, salvation lies right here at home. McKorot, the national water carrier, runs a desalination operation in Eilat that provides the city with no less than 80 percent of its water. IDE Technologies, a Ra'anana-based firm, is a world leader in desalination. Twenty years ago, it began a government-

funded desalination project at Ashdod, but the contract was scrapped a few years later. Today, IDE reportedly holds a 30-percent share of the world desalination market. The Israeli government is still not particularly interested in its services.

In a recent interview in the Yediot Ahronot daily, IDE'S president and CEO David Waxman offered, "as of tomorrow morning," to start building a major desalination plant for Israel. "We're not looking for government funding or private investors," he said. "Our company will invest the necessary \$300 million. We're sell the water to the government at a price lower than people pay now for the water that comes out of their taps. And we'll turn the plant over to the government after 20 years."

Waxman's phone did not ring the following morning. Israel's water commissioner, Meir Ben-Meir, remarked airily that the government would soon be soliciting bids for a desalination plant. "And IDE will be able to compete, along with everybody else."

Amid the clamor of panicked environmentalists, desperate farmers—and politicians and diplomats concerned by the potential for the region's eternal water shortage to badly strain relations with Jordan and the Palestinians, and downright destroy prospects for peace with Syria—Ben-Meir, uniquely it seems, is unconcerned. Even the Treasury, hitherto obsessed with what it said was the relatively high cost of desalinated water, has withdrawn longstanding opposition to a major desalination drive. But Ben-Meir comments mildly that the 213-meters-below-sea level Red Line at the Kinneret is only an arbitrary figure—that a dip of another few centimeters is no great disaster. When The Report called him on October 4, the harrassed-sounding-commissioner growled that he couldn't get any work done because of all the media hounding, and barked irritably that "there is no water crisis."

Ben-Meir, one wants to assume, knows what he's talking about. He is, after all, a 75-year-old veteran, the "manager," as he put it in our brief conversation, "of Israel's water resources." But just suppose, for a minute, that all the other worried activities are right, and the complacent Meir Ben-Meir is wrong. Isn't that a thought to make your throat go dry?